DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 291 EA 015 906

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TITLE Procrastination.
INSTITUTION Paulson & Associates, Inc., Agoura Hills, CA.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT Management Dialogue; n19 p1-3 Spr 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Guides; *Behavior Change; Behavior Patterns; *Change Strategies; Self Control; *Time Management
IDENTIFIERS PF Project; *Procrastination

ABSTRACT

Four areas of procrastination discussed in this article are: (1) the perfection trap; (2) the need to avoid avoidance; (3) the completion trap; and (4) the failure to prioritize. Included are an explanation of each area, examples of reasons people put off tasks, and methods of coping with procrastination. (EM)

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$1.00 "SPRING 1983" Issue No. 19

ED232291

EA 015 906

PROCRASTINATION

It is one thing to make New Year's resolutions about breaking bad time management habits; it is another to actually change those habits. One of the reasons can be summed up in one word — most of us have a tendency to procrastinate. How many times have you caught yourself saying, "Don't worry, I'll get to it. I know I will get started soon; probably tomorrow . . . or the next day, or at least by the weekend . . . someday." Proscrastination occurs to even the best time managers. As a result, it is worth taking the time to understand why we do it and what we can do to begin to overcome it. Of course, I suppose you could put off reading this article to a day you have more time.

Before we go any further, let's take a minute to get a little more personal. Just what do you have a tendency to put off, professionally or personally? You might want to make a list. Do any of these sound familiar? Do you put off conversations that might involve conflict, making cold calls, or asking for a date? Do you put off work you hate doing but know you have to do — reports, forms, tax returns, personnel evaluations, budgets, paying bills, or detail last minute detail work? Do you tend to cram on term papers or big projects? Do you put off pulling weeds, cleaning your closet or garage, or waxing that car? Have I listed enough. I'm sure you can add to that list and I hope you will. Now that you've got a feel for how procrastination makes its home in your own backyard, let's take a look at how to better understand and cope with the problem.

Four areas are worth exploring in depth: the Perfection Trap, the need to avoid avoidance, the completion trap, and the all too common failure to prioritize.

For many individuals one of the key contributing factors in procrastination is their unrealistic need for perfection. Unfortunately, the only place that perfect people exist are in educational movies and self-help books, and that is because they have the help of a script and can edit out errors. For the majority of us it is twenty minutes after the fact, before we come up with the witty comments we wish we had said. We are often just so-so, and certainly far from perfect. Many individuals seem unable to settle for anything less.

No one is ALWAYS anything; and nothing ALWAYS works. Even the most effective person will at times make mistakes; even the best time manager will at times put things off. Effective people make room for their own humanness. They are more concerned with getting it done that doing it perfectly.

Never let your desire to do things well become an obligation to be perfect. Take the trap out of excellence, by striving for excelience without waiting for the perfect thought, the perfect action, or the perfect time. You won't even do this perfectly, but that's OK, neither do I. Fear of failure keeps many people from starting; don't let that be you. You can become more effective in managing your time. Be able to develop affirmations you practice that are positive but realisitic, "I usually start and finish projects on time!" Avoid absolutes such as "always" or "never." Promising that you will never procrastinate or that you will always be timely, does not allow for your humanness or the unforeseen circumstances that occur in the real world. Believe in your ability to improve your habits, but be reasonable as well. Allow yourself the occasional lapses that you allow others, and then get started improving.

It is easy to be brave after listening to a motivating tape or after reading an inspiring book, but such fervor often dissipates quickly when in situations that demand follow through. The second major stumbling block in overcoming procrastination comes from our innate desire to stay within our psychological comfort zone. Most of us tend to avoid feelings of discomfort and anxiety. It is easier to understand procrastination, when you understand that most projects or situations we tend to procrastinate on result in such feelings of discomfort.

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We tend to get caught in an all too classic approach-avoidance conflict vascillating between the pain and discomfort of starting a job and the frustration and guilt of avoiding it.

The discomfort associated with complex, new, or aversive projects elicits rationalizations about why it is not the right time to act. "I don't have the time to really get into this!" "I'll probably have more time later this week." "I'm just not in the mood; it's not the right time." Such rationalizations tend to make "crammers" out of the best of us. We again wait until deadline pressures or external demands force us to take the time to tackle the work. Unfortunately, the time needed to cram on projects we put off usually comes at the expense of other personal and professional priorities. We may sacrifice family time by coming in early, staying late, or doing work at home. We may have to close the door and wall ourselves off from subordinates and peers on the job. We may get it done; but the cost is high. Successful "crammers" are even harder to change; they are even proud of their habits — "I'm a good crammer; I work best under pressure!" Pacing your work effectively over time can also be effective and tends not to bring with it the costs associated with cramming. If you have planned time to cram, hope you don't have another new and unexpected crisis or demand that needs to be handled as well — that is an open invitation to an early ulcer. Keep in mind if you wait until the cost of not doing the work or a deadline forces you to act, YOU are not in control of your time. You are letting other events control you. By learning to avoid avoidance, you can take control of your time and your projects.

Keep these three strategies in mind to avoid avoidance: First, expect to experience discomfort when you approach confrontations and initiate difficult or unpopular projects. Keep in mind that most anxiety and discomfort is anticipatory — it is before the event. Once you initiate the confrontation or actually start the project, the orienting process of the brain, your thinking, writing, talking, acting, will tend to inhibit the feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Build a positive anticipation for problem solving by visualizing the positive feelings associated with handling a confrontation well and the pride involved in getting the ball rolling on significant work you usually put off. Remember some things you first put off, when completed, actually resulted in positive experiences. Begin seeing yourself as a problem solver, not a problem evader; you can go beyond and through your discomfort to results you can be proud of.

Secondly, avoid the "timing trap" that can support continued procrastination. Waiting for the "right time" can be a constructive decision, but it can also give you a handy excuse that invites further avoidance. Every time you get ready to decide whether it is the "right time," you are subject to the influence of increased anxiety. Such feelings invite the easy escape — "Since I feel anxious; it must not be the right time." Try and pick a good time, but give yourself a realistic cut off. I use three days. If I haven't found the right time within a three-day period of time, I will not allow the third day to pass without "making the right time." You stop trying to find the right time; you do it. You will probably confront the problem or start the project before your time limit expires, but having one insures that you will have an end point that is hard to ignore.

Third, you may want to make an appointment or a priority commitment that will insure your acting on the matter at hand. By making an appointment with an individual you tend to avoid, you allow yourself to break your anxiety into two steps — first making the appointment and the second following through. Realize, when you make an appointment, you will follow through. Making an appointment can also help the other party by taking the surprise out of your confrontation. When people are caught off guard, they often react defensively rather than constructively. An appointment with a clear future-oriented agenda can set the stage for a constructive problem solving discussion. Appointments can also help you with projects you avoid. Establish an appointment with yourself at a specified time to start work on a given project. You might even make a commitment to a peer or secretary about your decision. Commitments increase the probability of action. Use your time system to record your appointment. Make getting started an "A" priority after the third day you have passed a project along. Once started, it is easier for most people to continue their productive paced progress. The central message of all three strategies remains the same — work at avoiding avoidance by staying current in confronting problems and initiating work you usually put off.

The "Completion trap" gives us a third helpful perspective in understanding our procrastination tendencies. We all have a strong need for closure; we hate to stop anything in midstream. We hate timed tests that are taken away before we have a chance to complete them. We hate to be interrupted by a call or a question at the end of a movie or while reading the last few pages of a good book. Many of you may even remember the 1968 Jets-Raiders football game that was cut off before completion when network executives switched from the game to the movie "Heidi." The phone circuits have probably never recovered from the deluge of calls from irate fans that were in no mood to see Heidi romping through the Alps. Such experiences help us understand the nature of the beast; we like to be allowed to finish things we get started.

As a result, many individuals put off work on long projects because they are waiting for a "big chunk of time" to tackle the problem. Ask yourself how many big chunks of time you have floating around your normal day. The real life interruptions that occur daily tend to make sustained concentration difficult, at best. Again, we find the uninterrupted time tends to occur before or after work, cutting into personal priorities if it is to be used to complete complex work projects. Welcome again to the need for the "cram" experience.

If you know you have a need for closure; learn to use it to your advantage. I love reading novels for relaxation but have learned to shy away from even good books that have long chapters. Such books tend to sit until I have enough time to sit down and read the whole chapter. A book of the same length with short chapters, I will read in half the time with twice the enjoyment. I can pick it up frequently for a short relaxing reading experience and put it down quickly knowing that I have read to a convenient break point.

Instead of taking all Saturday to clean my garage, I will choose to take an hour to make a significant dent in one area. I can clean up the workbench and move on to the storage cabinets the following weekend. By breaking the book and the home projects into bite-sized chunks, I can keep pushing projects forward one step at a time. Each step gives me satisfaction on the way to total completion.

The lesson should be clear by now. The first task necessary in any complex or long term project ought to be to break the project into sequential steps with target deadlines for each step. Once established, one can now pace their work by getting started on the first step. The fact remains that for many of us, hard work is an accumulation of easy tasks we didn't do when we could have. One woman expressed frustration about the time it would take to get an advanced degree if she went back to school, she lamented, "At my age, I'll be 45 by the time I get out." I hope my words were encouraging as I took the time to kid her, "I expect that you will be 45 anyway with or without a degree. If you don't start soon, you will have made your choice which it will be." Break work down into steps, get started, feel the satisfaction of completing each step along the way, and you will get there without cramming.

The final piece of the procrastination puzzle can be summed up by an all too familiar trap — we get stuck in the trivia many and seldom find time to get to the vital few. The failure to prioritize and to stick to priorities has been the downfall of far too many would be time managers. Goethe put it succinctly, "Never let the things that matter most be at the mercy of the things that matter least."

One of the tragic mistakes made by users of time mangement systems is to take the time to keep their daily goals list current while failing to prioritize. Keeping a to-do-list is good common sense time management, but it doesn't go far enough. By not taking the time to prioritize, it becomes too tempting to go for numbers not priority. There is something innately satisfying about crossing off items on

a list. Unfortunately, many of the quickest items to cross off are often the quick, low-priority trivia tasks that we can do but probably don't need to do. By mid-afternoon you may have crossed off 12 of the 16 items, but there is a nagging feeling of frustration as you realize that the day is nearly over and the "big four" vital jobs remain undone. You had the opportunity to cross off many jobs, but you now have no time to get to the vital tasks of the day. You've been working hard but not smart. You were lured into procrastination by hiding in the morass of busywork that confronts every person in today's complex world. You have a tendency to leave work frustrated without the sense of accomplishment you'd like to feel.

Plan AND prioritize to help break the procrastination habit. Be honest with yourself by identifying the vital work early when you plan for your day. Identify your "A" work; establish an order of attack; and get started on the work that really matters. You may not have as many tasks crossed off at the end of the day, but you will have the right work crossed off. You will seldom get everything done, but you can go to bed with a sense of accomplishment when you realize you have used your time wisely.

Procrastination is a habit that is all too human, but it is a habit that can be changed. Don't expect perfection; expect realistic progress. Anticipate the discomfort that comes with conflict and challenge and push through it to reap the benefits of timely problem solving. Break complex projects into bite-sized chunks and start taking bites one at a time. And finally, prioritize to keep you working smarter not just harder. If you enjoy your life as a crammer, you can put off change in this area as well as you can put off any other change. Welcome to the task of getting started.